

# The *Submerged Urlinie* and Musical Narrative

Ben Wadsworth and Meghan O’Harra  
Kennesaw State University  
SCSMT Annual Meeting, February 20, 2021

[1] Hello everyone. I’m Ben Wadsworth. This presentation has grown out of Meghan O’Harra’s final paper from my Intro to Schenker class. So let’s begin.

[2] Heinrich Schenker developed a method of analysis which sought to reduce music to its background, a basic harmonic structure called the *Ursatz*. The upper voice of this structure is the *Urlinie*, a fundamental descent down to scale degree <sup>^</sup>1. It is implied to be in the soprano voice.

This project deals with the assumption that the *Urlinie* exists only in the soprano. [click] In a Schenkerian approach, only the soprano is songlike and melody-bearing. [click] As reported by David Neumeyer, Schenker explains events higher than the structural soprano as static cover tones, or as boundary play (which is the embellishment of cover tones). [click] More recently, Brent Yorgason in a *Music Theory Spectrum* article has coined the term “Urlinie Play” for when there is a rivalry of two or more Urlinien. [click] A close analogue is Neumeyer’s 3-Part *Ursatz*, in which both scale degrees 3 and 5 are primary tones. [click] One or more of the rival lines is referred to as “submerged” because it is not in the soprano. [click] This kind of situation is often seen in the Romantic Era, particularly in Chopin. [click] We can thank Charles Rosen for discussing “latent polyphony,” in which voices come into and out of focus. This is one of the most prized aspects of Chopin’s piano writing. [click] Why is this an exciting approach? Urlinie Play increases the level of in-time nuance in Schenker’s theory and helps explain expressive meaning more specifically.

[3] Here is a classic example of latent polyphony given by Rosen. In the hymn-like B section of Chopin's first Scherzo, the pianist's R.H. thumb plays a melody in the alto, but after 6 measures, the soprano **[click]** slides smoothly into focus and makes both alto and soprano equally prominent. So latent polyphony is the ambiguity of which voice has the principal melody. We will show more examples at the end of the presentation. Please listen **[play]**.

[4] Yorgason's article focuses on the analytical criteria and compositional strategies of Urlinie Play. **[click]** The criteria for a focal voice include metrical accents, placement in an upper voice, melodic variety, and so on. The opposites of these suggest a non-focal voice. **[click]** Next, Yorgason suggests four strategies of Urlinie play: **[click]** shadowing, **[click]** reversion, **[click]** denial, and **[click]** competition. These strategies mainly differ in their degree of structural priority: shadowing has one register clearly more prominent than the other, whereas competition shows two voices approaching a 50/50 structural split, or almost equivalent in priority.

[5] In his analysis of Robert Schumann's "Happy Farmer," Yorgason places the Urlinie in the tenor, shown with the upstemmed half notes. The light shading on the upper voice **[click]** shows a weaker Urlinie in the soprano that shadows the tenor. The tenor is focal because of the ear is drawn to it: it tends to be more legato, onbeat, and melodically smooth than the soprano. As Yorgason says, "This particular shadow Urlinie does not force itself on the ear, but if one were determined to position the fundamental line in the soprano register, it would not be hard to do so."

[6] Our own analysis is more detailed and multivalent. It is a closer model of the piece's latent polyphony. We retain Yorgason's shading for echoing voices. The boxed letters **[click]** refer to focal voices that carry the Urlinie, and the arrows show when and where it is transferred. We agree with Yorgason that the tenor starts off as most prominent, and then the soprano is in m. 4, both the soprano and tenor are in m. 9 **[click]**, then the tenor is in m. 13 **[click]**. But at the end, the soprano in m. 14 **[click]** briefly reasserts its priority with an accented G4 that reminds us slyly of the soprano's previous melodic character. Thus, in our analysis the Urlinie Play resembles Competition the most since both the soprano and tenor have their songlike and focal moments. From here, we find that "Happy Farmer" contains an overall upwards direction in its focal register, which along with

the major mode, produces a sunny expression and a narrative archetype we call “Optimism.”

[7] More broadly, there are two main issues with Yorgason’s approach: **[click]** first, the four types of Urlinie Play do not address questions of musical narrative; **[click]** and second, Competition is the most frequent and interesting strategy from early 19<sup>th</sup>-century music. **[click]** In “Happy Farmer,” we took the approach of Competition. **[click]** We used right-pointing arrows, vocal part labels, and labels such as question marks to show ambiguities of focal melodies. **[click]** Despite some complications, the structural register shifted overall from tenor to tenor + soprano, creating a brightening effect. **[click]** And instances of Shadowing were local byproducts of Competition.

[8] **[click]** In general, Competition is more prevalent than other strategies. **[click]** Similarly, recent theories of musical narrative have assumed basic oppositions between both musical and semantic meanings. **[click]** Most fundamental is the association of major mode with positive, or “pleasurable” things, versus minor with negative, or “unpleasant” ones. **[click]** Hatten’s writings have featured the opposition between expressive genres, as signaled by changes from minor to major **[click]**, and Almén **[click]** has traced oppositions between a structural hierarchy and a disruption to it, called a “transgression.” Similarly, **[click]** we reorient the concept of Urlinie Play around conflicts between different registers, and theorize registers themselves.

[9] **[click]** Our thesis is that, by mapping registral conflicts to oppositions in other parameters, especially mode, we can lay out musical narratives that have clearly defined temporal “moments.” **[click]** Our first question was then: which registral objects engage in conflict? **[click]** Pitch classes, scale degrees, and **[click]** even Schenkerian voices cannot since they can freely change register. **[click]** Instead, we define a most general level of registral objects as “low” vs. “high.” **[click]** Then we subdivide this loose space into four vocal parts (S, A, T, B) and then into **[click]** subdivided vocal parts such as S1, S2, etc.

[10] We then found that we could create archetypal narratives by looking at registers and modes in conjunction. **[click]** A study by Jaquet, Danuser, and Gomez found that classical pieces that were played at their original key

or up an octave were more positively valenced, **[click]** but that excerpts adjusted down an octave were negatively valenced. As well, relatively speaking **[click]** major mode is positively valenced, and **[click]** minor is negatively valenced. **[click]** We have four narrative archetypes: **[click]** “low to high” in major; **[click]** low to high in minor; **[click]** high to low in major; and **[click]** high to low in minor. So far, we have found the expression of different works having the same narrative to be likewise similar. I will now turn the presentation over to my co-author, Meghan O’Harra.

[11] Hi, I’m Meghan O’Harra. Today we will analyze two Chopin Preludes, starting with the famous A major one. The prelude is overall in a parallel period form. The antecedent phrase is in measures 1 through 8 and ends with the IAC in measures 5 through 8; the consequent in measures 9 through 16 takes us on a magical journey with a higher F# dominant seventh chord in measure 12, which then leads back to the overall tonic of A through falling fifth root motion to B, E, then A. On the slide, we have highlighted descending stepwise motives using blue, and ascending ones using red. Please listen. [play]

[12] This work is registrally very interesting. The antecedent phrase has a songlike soprano part **[click]** that switches between primary tones on scale degrees 3 and 5. In the consequent phrase, **[click]** some strange things happen. In m. 11, a new, higher soprano (labeled as S2) makes a bid for attention, but we are not yet convinced that this IS the soprano register. In m. 13, the melody reverts back to the original soprano register, but then if the Urlinie is to descend to “do” over I with harmonic support, it must shift to the alto part since notes such as D and F# are higher in pitch. In mm. 15–16, scale degree 1 of the Urlinie is transferred up an octave to the higher pitch A5, suggesting (but not strongly) that maybe S2 was the true soprano register! The upper register, though, is not focal so is shaded.

[13] Expressively, what are the consequences of these registral oppositions? This table shows the antecedent phrase on the left and the consequent on the right. **[click]** You can see the shift from a higher part (labeled as S1 on the left side) to a lower, more prominent voice (labeled as A) on the right side. Although there are brief, non-focal moves upward to S2, the focal move is downward overall. In terms of topics **[click]**, as shown in the bottom row, we shift from waltz and berceuse to a more “weightless” concept at the end: not only is the Urlinie at rest on a pillow of the alto part,

but the music literally “floats away” to the pitch A5, which twinkles like a star that overlooks the sleepy scene.

[14] Our second analysis is of Chopin’s B minor prelude, known as the “heartbeat” prelude due to its repeated strong-weak accent pattern on repeated notes. This piece is also constructed as a parallel period, but minor mode and phrase extensions convey the idea of intense resignation. Perhaps the piece is a blow-by-blow account of an ill person’s death. Notably, the soprano part is melodically restricted [**click**], and cannot be interpreted overall as the content of an Urlinie. Please listen [play].

[15] In the antecedent, the tenor part starts out as focal, with a primary tone of D (scale degree 3 of B minor). As is expected at cadences, the soprano comes back into prominence in measure 6 as a commentary upon the tenor melodic line.

[16] In the consequent, the tenor reasserts priority in a phrase that concludes on the Neapolitan in measure 13, a really early location for it in this piece. Notice that the soprano part, throughout the consequent, cannot support an Urlinie since scale degrees flat 2, 1, and 7 continually alternate. Instead, the focal melodic line migrates ever lower, into a mix of tenor and bass in m. 15, and then a pure bass in m. 17. This excerpt ends with an extension to the consequent, and it cadences deceptively, suggesting the imagery of “waiting.”

[17] In the consequent to the extension, the focal part again moves from a mix of bass and tenor to all bass, right as the work cadences structurally on the B minor tonic. In the brief coda, the soprano part on scale degree 1 or 8 finally drops down through  $\hat{7}$  to 5. However, scale degree  $\hat{6}$  in this passing motion is omitted, thereby suggesting a loss of self (a sort of forgetting or numbness). Then the tenor regains prominence, but this is at a more local level since the structural cadence has already occurred. Any descent of the Urlinie is displaced into a low alto range, and is not focal, as is shown by the shading in measures 19 to 22.

[18] We thus have a clearly laid out, 5-stage narrative. It is really interesting that the move to the Neapolitan (flat-II) occurs so early in this prelude, and as a brightening in m. 13. As shown on bottom, we have five temporal moments: the tragic heartbeat with soprano commentary; the Neapolitan as release; the “waiting” extension; the move to resignation; and the final loss

of self in the coda. The actual tragedy is expressed primarily by registers in slow motion across the piece. The extension to the consequent suggests the waiting for the death that is already accepted.

[19] In all, **[click]** our project has shown that the narrative archetypes have been stable over different analyses. **[click]** We have added a further interpretive layer of register to Romantic works, **[click]** clear temporal moments in the tables, **[click]** and more in-time nuance. **[click]** So where do we go from here? **[click]** One could investigate music from other 19th-century composers, and other style eras. **[click]** We are also weighing whether Chopin might have given others the initial inspiration for this technique, or maybe even Bach? **[click]** And how might one explain works that begin and end on the same registral state?

[20] Thank you all for listening. I'll end with two more examples of latent polyphony, as promised **[cue slide 21, then slide 22]**.